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ON FRIENDSHIP

By KATHARINE SCHERMERHORN OLIVER

Measured against the frailties and exposures of humanity, what a friend a piano is after all! Taken in its own right it claims attention—always ready to fit in to your mood without intruding more of its own personality than time and usage have made obvious, always calm, strong, and helpful. In return for a thousand voicings of your despair, helplessness, solemnity, humor, joy, it asks nothing. The self-effacement of my piano makes me long to push it out in the air, to give it a view of the blowaway tree that it just misses,—to perform any of the hundred attentions that you would give to a friend that couldn't move about. I could dust indefinitely that my piano should have a shining morning face. And I count the man inhuman and no musician who will pile his bound Beethoven sonatas, hymnals and opera scores upon his aching piano's back. There is the slightest excuse if he pleads warmth, but he must have heard of velvet. And surely he should consider sound waves. But perhaps he has no right to have a piano. So many people haven't, and so many people own them. They are (Heaven help that piano's pride!) for the children to practice on; or, and I can scarcely bring myself to write it, they are for "looks." Now the soul of a piano with its depths and shadows and subtleties is no light thing to trifle with. It can be approached gently and treated intelligently, and presently with shy eyes but abounding enthusiasm it will spring to you to be your willing friend on all except perhaps rainy days. It has the reviled and coveted and misquoted artistic temperament. As a salient characteristic of the latter, the weather affects its soul along with its body. A cold will cause the loss of all its sunny serenity of mind. But each piano is different—it is ignorant to generalize.

I remember when our first Steinway grand came. The family, losing individual acumen when together, thought and talked in chorus. With the expressman—the servant of the new visitor—still there, with traveling togs and gear about its heels, they pushed and prodded me to "try it." And I would not. I am pleased to this day when I recall the fact that I did not touch the keys at all, but slipped away behind taller figures. A second later I heard a Chopin waltz crashing out, and fled farther away in distress, feeling for the piano. Late that night when the family were interested in other things I made my way to the high bench and clambered up; and there in the calm of order and

decency I played "Der Dichter Spricht" of the Kinderscenen. And I felt rewarded. Those liquid pure tones assured me that I had done well, and that when I asked I should have balm for the soul and peace to the mind. When I leave my piano in these later days I play "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind," but when I return to it Schumann's perfect notes assure me of usefulness in life and joy in living it.

Not every piano will so respond. There is the old square piano in the country where we sometimes go to see our great grand-mother's home. It is a very dear friend, but old and tired and can not help grumbling a little. You have to treat it very gently and quickly. It likes best the Grieg "Spring Song" and "Anitra's Tanz" or something tinkling and imitative like the de Sévérac "Dancing Doll on the Music Box." You must amuse it, and so it can only receive a short visit each day; for one can not be always amusing. It is too bad that it is getting childish, but the pride that came into being with the consciousness of development in usefulness and subtlety over its ancestors is not lost. I don't mean to say that those who had gone before were not honored. You can not see an ancient spinet or clavichord to-day, weak, tinkling, discouraged as they are at often being locked up in cases devoid from companionship and expression, without knowing that some of their pride is still there and fed by the honor given them by every piano created since. They scorn indeed these "nouveau riche" clavichords, gold and white affairs with mottos like "La Douceur fait plus que la Violence," that Chickering assures you are exact imitations. Imitations indeed—that is the word that hurts. The real clavichords remember their old days under sunny Italian skies before Cristofori ever lived, when black-eyed musicians, and ladies in satins and pearls, rippled arias across their ivory keys. Or they think perhaps of some French court where they stood in state, rich in gold and gay pictures on their backs, of ladies reclining beneath feathery trees, while in golden candlelight Couperin, or better still Rameau, ran his supple fingers across their keys in a dozen variations on a given theme.

But all of us do not appreciate family trees. I've met many a piano—complaining, loud, truly almost vulgar—that I will wager never guessed at a French court or a piano before itself for that matter. Such a piano has no right indeed to the family name, suggested, they say, since the liquid ripples that came from the first of the line reminded Cristofori or some other old Italian of that tinkling stream between Menagio and Porlezza

that is called the Piano. And since the little stream only told half of the story, the name became Pianoforte. No, the bourgeoisie, the middle-class pianos can better boast their Christian appellations. One can grant them a quota of legitimate pride when they are put next to the masses, the unthinking, the pianolas. Only their scorn had best lie unexpressed—that lion of the populace, the Welte-Mignon is a radical of no meagre pretensions.

But it is a detached, abstracted radical—and such a one can never win the heart of the people. If you have seen Harold Bauer walk up to his piano and lay his hands on it, you will know how he loves it. And Paderewski, too, in a more domineering way. He will not tolerate a draft or a speck of dust on his. And Percy Grainger just enfolds his piano with a halo of sunshine. Most of these artists always take their own pianos about with them. I have often wanted to be great, that I might take mine on a trip and give it the honor that it deserves. As it is, I can only keep it well dusted and surrounded with glowing pictures and flowers. Perhaps love for it, perhaps jealousy, perhaps just interest in making friends makes me long to know every piano that I see. If you do not play you will never know the agony of sitting in a room where people are saying stupid things while you are longing to know the piano. If they would leave, if you could outstay them, if you could get up and play—but you do not want to play for them. If they ask you it is a slight relief, unless you do not feel like playing, which they can not understand; or unless they say: “I hope you will excuse the piano, it is rather out of tune, or very old.” Very old, you can bear best—some old people are very fascinating—but out of tune, out of its mind! oh! heavens, would they take you to an asylum to meet some friends? Do they think you have no feelings of pity and personal pride? Ah, but you are glad to come home to your own piano. No matter how many small sisters have been “doing Czerny” and small brothers stumbling at one finger bugle-calls, it will answer to your need. It will melt into some intimate Brahms intermezzo or Scriabine nocturne. It will give you the brilliance of Chopin, the honesty of Bach, or the glorious strength of César Franck. If we know our pianos and love them, and feel with them—what divine melodies shall we not find for ourselves and others? The joy of ensemble that leaps higher and higher with each piano, violin, and 'cello that joins the group, is here in small measure. We are not alone in an empty room or in a crowded auditorium if we know our piano. We have a friend indeed.